

GTDRIVES: Dynamic Dialogues – Episode 1

A. Michael Pratt:

He knew that there were racist things that happened, or going on in the world, but this hit home. For the first time I saw in his eyes, he said, "I'm vulnerable. This could be me." His birthday was coming up, and we tried to do a Zoom birthday celebration with his sisters, and family. He turned it off. He couldn't do it. He couldn't celebrate because he said, "I can't enjoy this moment." I thought, I'm going to put something in writing to him. Number one, to tell him I feel his pain. Number two, to give him at least my views, thoughts about guidance, and how we as black people in America... Black men in America... How we should address this.

Speaker 2:

Hello and welcome to today's program. GT Social Justice Action Academy for Courageous Conversation with shareholder, A. Michael Pratt. Michael will be joined in the discussion today by shareholder, and Chief Diversity Officer, Nikki Lewis Simon. In today's program, Michael will courageously share stories about segments of his life, and how they've shaped him as a black attorney, and father. Nikki, you're welcome to begin.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for joining today's Courageous Conversation with A. Michael Pratt. As [inaudible 00:01:28] shared my name is Nikki Lewis Simon, and I'm a shareholder in the Miami office, and I have the privilege of serving as the first Chief Diversity Officer.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

What are these Courageous Conversations? This was really born out of the social unrest magnified by the murder of George Floyd, and many black and brown people before him and even since then. They're really platforms for sharing and learning, listening, and challenging ourselves to do more in this space to make our country, and our firm more equitable.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

These Courageous Conversations are brought to you by the GT Social Justice Action Academy, which is also birthed out of recent civil unrest. It's a collaborative effort of GT DRIVES, which is diversity, retention, inclusion, value, elevate, and success, which is GT's diversity and initiative platform along with the Hoffman Professionalism Center. Thank you again, so much for joining us.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Let's talk a little bit about Michael's letter. It's entitled, A Black Father's Letter To His Black Son. My Mission Is To Keep You Safe. That letter was published by the American lawyer on June 18th. Friday, June 18th. Right on the eve of Father's Day. That letter really captured the hearts of many, mine included, because it talks about Michael's fears, and hopes on the eve of his son's college graduation while the country was struggling with its history of racism, and slavery, and the inability to completely reconcile that past.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Michael's letter, a father's letter, resulted from his own journey as a black man in America. We'll get to that letter in a moment, but first, let me give you a little background on A. Michael Pratt. He's a Harvard law graduate, has practiced significant litigation for more than 35 years, he has background graded AV

GTDRIVES: Dynamic Dialogues – Episode 1

Preeminent. You can look him up on our internet. A fabulous lawyer, father, and friend. The accolades are long, but I'll share with you just by way of highlights. Not only is he a titan in the bar, he is also a titan in the community. He's been Philadelphia Bar Association... A member of the board of governors from 2006 to 2010, and served as its Chancellor in 2008. He also served on the Pennsylvania Bar Association House of Delegates from 1995 to 2008, and on the ABA House of Delegates from 2012 to 2014. Trust me, that's the short list. Before we jump into it, Michael, thank you so much for joining me this afternoon.

A. Michael Pratt:

First of all, thank you to Greenberg Traurig for showing courage to sponsor these programs. These are very difficult questions, and they make people uncomfortable. I understand that. It's kudos to them as an institution and thank you, Nikki, and your team for coming up with this idea. I'm humbled to be asked to launch this series off, and hope I can help us move this conversation along.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Thank you so much. Okay. Let's jump into it. I want to read a little bit about Michael's background, and I'm going to be reading from an excerpt of his installation speech when he was installed as Chancellor of the Philadelphia Bar Association. It reads in part, I was born in a small house in Grindstone, Pennsylvania. I was the fourth of 12 children, and sometimes we did have to share a bed. We didn't have running water in our home, and our bathroom was an outhouse. To say that we were not people of means, well, that would be a gross understatement. But thanks to my mother, we did have means. We had the means to hope, the means to dream, the means to keep faith with ourselves and our family, and we also had the means to work hard, and to help one another. You see, Joan Tracy was a young mother who married before finishing high school.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

For a good number of years, she was a single mother who provided for her family with little money, but loads of love, personal sacrifice and discipline. Her family was, and is the number one priority in her life. I still remember her cleaning an entire church for \$10, so she could buy her young basketball playing son, Anthony Michael, a pair of Converse All Stars, that he wore out in one week. I also remember this young mother driving her car full of children to see a house she hoped we could rent, but being told by the landlord, that he would not rent to us because we were black. But not withstanding that, and other discriminatory experiences, my mother always taught her children to judge people, not by the color of their skin, but by loving standards of decency, and humanity.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

The only admonition she ever gave us was that if your friends come to our home, you better be permitted to go to theirs. Michael, from that installation speech, you share that snapshot of your background, and how racism impacted your life even as a young child. Can you share for our listeners a little more about the experience of not being able to rent a home because of your race, and how that impacted you and your family?

A. Michael Pratt:

Sadly, at that time it didn't register. It registered, but it was a part of our life. It was accepted that there were lines that were drawn, that our options were limited, of that there were very few people who would rent to a black family, and only in certain areas. Particularly in rural Pennsylvania where we were

GTDRIVES: Dynamic Dialogues – Episode 1

from. It was something that we simply had to deal with. There was a lot of defacto segregation. We didn't have the option of filing a lawsuit against the landlord, but we accepted it, and we simply moved on. It was something that as we moved on from home to home for several years... It was something that we knew, that we simply had to navigate around. But at least at that point, there was no sense that things would be changing anytime soon. We did know this. We did know that we would be educated, we would work hard, and our mother would not let our race be an excuse for the fact that we didn't give full effort.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Excellent. For sure Michael. Thank you. What other experiences of systemic racism do you recall growing up as a young boy in rural Pennsylvania, either in grade school, junior high, or high school, or in the community?

A. Michael Pratt:

Well, this is probably long. I will... I guess I'll start to start with this. Back then, we had moved to a little town, and I remember I was in first grade. I was six years old, and I don't know how many of you recall that we were... Back then they had two reading classes. One was a... They didn't label them. They labeled them A and B, but it really meant one was a slow reading class, one was accelerated reading class. There were about three black children in the... In my class, as I recall, but we were all in the slow reading class. Now, at six years old, I didn't understand exactly what was going on. Didn't know it was a slow reading class, and I happened to one day, be at my desk and during a time out, I had some numbers, and I just sort of counted with these little blocks, one to a hundred. To me it wasn't that big a thing.

A. Michael Pratt:

The teacher came and huddled around, and seemed in... Somehow amazed. Next thing I know she went out, brought in another teacher, and they hovered over me, and the next thing I know, I'm in the other reading class. It was a eye opener because then I understood that simply because of my color, or my skin, I was immediately stereotyped. I was put into a slow reading class until I proved to them that I didn't belong. This was a... And as we moved on in these small towns, what I began to discover was that this, this sort of dynamic was consistent. That one, or two of us may be in some of the academic classes, but most of the black children were in general classes. Some of my friends were in special ed, which I could not understand why... Who seemed very bright to me, but that was sort of... At that point, those were things we simply didn't fight, and that carried its way almost all through high school.

A. Michael Pratt:

The only difference was some of us were athletes. You got a little ahead of the class, you got a little special [inaudible 00:11:10] but for the most part, those lines really never crossed. That being called racial apartheid was all for the cause, but it was simply a way of a life. We had white friends. I had white male friends, but it was... To have interracial friends from the opposite sex was completely taboo outside of the classroom. But again, those were things that were sort of part of the life that we lived, and we understood it, and accepted it.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Then given that experience from a very young age. Sixth grade, being assumed unintelligent, not being able to rent because of the color of your skin, only to then be determined intelligent, and move to the

GTDRIVES: Dynamic Dialogues – Episode 1

next class in terms of accelerated reading, what perception did you develop? I think you've touched a little bit about that in terms of, this is the system that we're in, but any other perceptions that you developed then about race, or how you might be impacted, or how you would have to work to overcome the system into which you have been born because of your race?

A. Michael Pratt:

Well, what we understood... What you became to understand is that there was an inexplicable, irrational hatred for some of us simply because of the color of our skin, as a group. Some of that was [inaudible 00:12:52] and direct. Some of that was less direct, and was, was a bit more subtle. But again, it was something that we knew existed. What we also knew, and what I understood, was we didn't have many role models in my small town. We didn't have a game plan, and we didn't have a map to outline what our opportunities was. Our world was fairly small. But again, we did know this. That there were the expectation of those of us who have the ability that we would move on to college. Where that would take us, we don't know, but we knew that that was the only option. The only opportunity we had to move ourselves forward through what for many of us was a system filled with a lot of racial roadblocks. We knew that was the only way we were going to get around.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

Thank you for that. Let's fast forward a little bit. You mentioned college. You mentioned that as you neared high school graduation... You mentioned this as well in your chancellor constellation speech, that you wanted to go to college, and the goal, and I quote, was get a business degree, a nice job and call it a life. End of quote. Did you have any experiences along that path that impacted your future in terms of race, or social, or economic justice?

A. Michael Pratt:

After I realized that I was never going to make it to the NBA, I understood, and there was not an option. My mother made it clear. It wasn't an option. I was going to college. I knew very little about college. I knew that other than schools that may have come to recruit me to play basketball, or some of the local state schools... I knew very little. I recall one of my football coaches telling me that a smart black man should think about going to the Ivy League. I had no idea what he was talking about. I had never heard of it. What's an Ivy League school? I was too embarrassed to ask him. I wasn't aware. I had never heard of historically black colleges. I didn't have parents who had gone to college. Both my parents hadn't finished high school.

A. Michael Pratt:

In that town, we had one black professional. I take it back. We had a dentist, and then I had one black teacher who was my eighth grade homeroom teacher, and taught me social studies. There really wasn't the kind of guidance that you would need to... There simply wasn't... Didn't know what the options of majors were. All we knew was you go to college, you get a degree, get a decent job, and you take care of your family, and you try to give back to that extended family who may not have had the same opportunities that you had. But that was... and so that was introduction to not quite understanding. Didn't call it economic justice, or racial justice, but I knew that if I was going to be a benefit to my community, and give back, I had to succeed, with no idea where that was going to lead, but I would succeed.

Nikki Lewis Simon:

GTDRIVES: Dynamic Dialogues – Episode 1

Awesome. Yeah. Many of us found ourselves in similar situations. My parents didn't originally graduate from college when I went away to college. You just heard that, that's where you're going, and that's what you're going to do, and you'd figure it out as you go. So, a similar experience.

A. Michael Pratt:

Yeah. It's-

Nikki Lewis Simon:

So-

A. Michael Pratt:

Let me just add one thing Nikki, as I'm thinking about this because this path along the way... That we... One thing that was clear while we were... The racism was our way of life, and some of those racial incidents, and experiences were our way of life. We never... There was never any discussion, or talk around my home, or around my black friends about hating people because of the color of their skin. Never. We'd talk about... Being concerned about who we thought may be a racist against us, and discriminating against us, but there was never that talk. That kind of talk.

A. Michael Pratt:

What it did do in terms of that racial justice, it created a sort of distrust because while we may not have hated, there were a number of our experiences where it was hard to let your guard down with your white friends. I remember I had a white friend. A male friend, a few doors down. We'd play together. Remember going to his home. Sitting in a room when playing with, he went to go into the other living room, and he was having a conversation with his family, and I assume they didn't know I could hear it. They apparently were thinking about moving.

A. Michael Pratt:

I heard him say... This is my friend. Him say, "I don't want to move down near all those..." You fill in the blank. That's just one of a number of experiences that we would have had to address. That, how do we know? We want to judge people for who they are, and where their heart... And what's in their heart. It created a degree of distrust in terms of how we... Who do we trust, and how do we move on in the society, particularly a society where the people who sort of controlled... People with means didn't look like us?